

Material from:
Introduction to Paralegal Studies
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A Guide to Legal Citations (Rhode Island & Federal)

In legal research and legal writing, it is important to understand the system that is used to refer to the location of legal materials (statutes, cases, regulations, etc.) When a court in one case refers to an earlier court decision, lawyers say that the court is “citing” the case. When we refer to a statute or regulation in a legal memorandum or brief, we are “citing” the law. When we do legal research, we have to write down the “cites” of the material we find. Legal citations are just shorthand ways of referring to the sources that we are using or writing about. Instead of having to say that a case is found in Volume 478 of the Atlantic Reporter, Second Series at Page 167 and was decided in 1984, we can just write 478 A.2d 167 (1984) after the case name and those familiar with legal citations know exactly what we mean by this shorthand reference.

General Citation Rules: There are standard abbreviations used for the court reporters, statute books, and regulations encountered in legal research. The rule for abbreviations in legal citations is that for single letter abbreviations, no spaces are used; but for multi-letter abbreviations a space is put before and after it. For example, the abbreviation for the United States Code Annotated (U.S.C.A.) has no spaces between the letters since they are all single letters. However, in abbreviating the Federal Supplement, Second Series (F. Supp. 2d), there is a space before and after the multi-lettered abbreviation for the word “supplement”. Note that numbers (such as 2d and 3d) are treated as single letter abbreviations. Thus, we would type “A.2d” without a space between the “A.” and the “2d”.

Rules for Citing Court Decisions: A citation (or cite) to a published court decision would start with the short name of the case as found in the court reporter. This case name should be underlined or put in italics. Both are correct and with a computer we could easily do either one. Some people still prefer to just underline and italics are sometimes hard to read or distinguish. After the case name, we would put a comma and a space. The volume of the court reporter comes next followed by a space. The abbreviation of the court reporter name is next (A.2d for example) followed by a space and then the page number. After the page number we would put the year the case was decided in parentheses. It may also be necessary to include a reference to the court that decided the case if the court is not apparent from the reporter name. For example, in citing cases just found in the Atlantic Reporter 2d for Rhode Island, the letters “R.I.” would be added to the parentheses before the year of the case since there are several states that have cases published in the Atlantic Reporter. If we were citing a case in the Federal Reporter that contains cases from all 13 circuit courts of appeals, we would need to indicate the circuit the case come from in the parentheses before the year. See the examples below to see what this means in operation.

If we are quoting from a court decision in a legal memorandum or brief, we should use what is called a “pinpoint cite” which tells us the exact page that the quote will be found. We construct the citation in the usual way but then add in the page where the quote appears. For example, a reference to 478 A.2d 167, 172 would mean that the case started at page 167 but the quote is found at page 172. This pinpoint cite helps the reader (who perhaps may be a judge) by enabling the reader to find the quote quickly without looking through the entire reported decision to find it. If we are using cases from the on-line subscription services (WestLaw and LexisNexis), the page numbers of the printed material will be indicated on the computer screen which we can then use for pinpoint cites.

Rules for Citing Statutes: For federal statutes, the title of the law being referred to comes first, followed by the abbreviation for the set of the United State Code we are using. Next there would be a section symbol (§) following the specific section of the law. For R.I. statutes, we use a three-part number as mentioned in Chapter One. We would start out with “G.L.” which is the set of books we are using. This is followed by the section symbol (§) and the three part number of the statute. If a reference to a Rhode Island statute is being made in a document filed in federal court or in another state, we would use the abbreviation “G.L.R.I.” instead of just “G.L.”.

Citations Examples

I. Rhode Island Court Decisions:

- A. Cases on or prior to 4/10/80 which are reported in Rhode Island Reports and in the Atlantic Reporter Series (Volumes 1 to 14 of R.I. Reports are not in Atlantic):

Traugott v. Petit, 122 R.I. 60, 404 A.2d 77 (1979)

- B. Cases after 4/10/80 which are reported in Atlantic Reporter Series and which are reprinted in West's Rhode Island Reporter (R.I. Reporter not cited):

Formisano v. Blue Cross of Rhode Island, 478 A.2d 167 (R.I. 1984)

- C. Cases not yet published in Atlantic Reporter Series:

Marra v. O'Leary, R.I. Supreme Court No. 94-398-Appeal
decided January 25, 1995

II. Rhode Island Statutes:

- A. Statutes from the General Laws (Title, Chapter, Section):

G.L. § 33-1-1 or G.L.R.I. § 33-1-1

B. Public Laws of Rhode Island (Year, Chapter, Section):

P.L. 1986, ch. 177, § 1

III. Federal Court Decisions:

A. U.S. District Court for the District of Rhode Island (D.R.I.):

DeWitt v. Ventetoulo, 803 F. Supp. 580 (D.R.I. 1992)

B. First Circuit Court of Appeals (1st Cir.):

44 Liquormart v. Rhode Island, 39 F.3d 5 (1st Cir. 1994)

C. U.S. Supreme Court (U.S.):

Tenney v. Brandhove, 341 U.S. 367, 71 S. Ct. 783, 95 L. Ed. 1019 (1951)

IV. Federal Statutes (official or unofficial Codes may be used); give title, code abbreviation, section number):

A. United States Code (official edition):

15 U.S.C. § 1701

B. United States Code Annotated (West Publishing):

15 U.S.C.A. § 1701

C. United States Code Service (Lexis Publishing):

15 U.S.C.S. § 170

D. Federal Public Laws (use number of Congress when law enacted)

Pub L No. 110-234

5. American Law Reports Annotations: use author's full name, the word "Annotation", the title of the annotation, the citation, and the year.

Gregory J. Swain, Annotation, Operation of Mopeds and Motorized Recreational Two-, Three-, and Four-Wheeled Vehicles as within scope of Driving While Intoxicated Statutes, 32 A.L.R. 5th 659 (1995)